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Founding concepts: Sapir and Simmel on ‘communication’

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Abstract

These lecture notes are one product of a re-evaluation and re-design of the curriculum of the Master’s program in Intercultural Communication (ICC) at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, undertaken in 2016-2017 by Betsy Rymes, Anne Pomerantz, and Robert Moore. The ICC Program has always had a significant service-learning/internship requirement, and the re-design of the curriculum aimed to give more support to our students as novice ethnographers seeking in their final year of the Program to integrate their observations from their internship experiences with issues and themes in the literature(s) of intercultural communication (more on this in a future publication). The lecture below inaugurated a new class/module in the ICC curriculum, tentatively titled “Ethnography of Communication” (Educ 545-001, Fall 2017). In it I try to use a close reading of two classic texts to establish some fundamental principles for the study of communicative practices in their social context(s). The “Ethnography of Communication” course was designed with two purposes in mind: (a.) to allow students to organize their field materials and begin to select data for further exploration in subsequent courses through data-analysis workshop activities, and (b.) to renew and deepen students’ contact with fundamental ideas from the literature through readings, lectures, and discussions. In these lecture notes (with footnotes added later) I try to exploit every opportunity to connect the insights and *aperçus* of two early observers of modern life, Georg Simmel and Edward Sapir, to the practical concerns of novice ethnographers in 2017.

Educ 545-001, Ethnography of Communication

Sapir and Simmel on ‘communication’ (18 Sept 2017)

Simmel, Georg. 1950 [1903]. The metropolis and mental life. In K. Wolff (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, pp. 409-424. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Sapir, Edward. 1949 [1931]. Communication. In D. Mandelbaum (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*, pp. 104-109. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Introduction

We are all of us engaged in the ethnographic study of the contemporary world (sometimes called “the present”), viewed through the lens of communication.

We are all also engaged in studying the everyday life of a diverse set of institutions—otherwise known as your internship sites: A securities firm in China; a community media production facility in Philadelphia; a refugee resettlement agency in Philadelphia; on-campus services for a diverse student population; a semi-state entity promoting diplomacy and international understanding; institutions and organizations offering support for international students in the US; a “new media” firm in Beijing; an office of the US Department of Labor that trains compliance officers.

So in a somewhat narrower sense, all of us are doing workplace ethnography: seeing how day-to-day life within these organizations is carried on in and through practices of communication, in multiple modalities—from informal face-to-face conversation to carefully planned events to email, websites, and social media. Each of these has affordances and limitations. Some of these organizations are public-facing; others serve more narrowly defined client populations. Some offer formal classroom instruction (including language classes); others design and carry out events to fulfill a more broadly educational mission; still others offer support to immigrants and refugees to help them navigate the communication demands of life in a new country. In many cases, communicative events and practices actually *are* what these organizations produce. And many of these are either explicitly (events, workshops, and “trainings” designed to promote intercultural understanding) or implicitly (adult ESL classes) *about* intercultural communication.

This is why we need some fundamental analytic concepts to help us understand “communication” within a social frame of reference, and at least a few ideas about how we might go about organizing our observations of the communicative happenings to which we have been witnesses and/or participants. We also need the tools, observational and analytic, that will help us take account of a complex and changing communicative—and intercultural—environment. To this end, we start with two foundational texts, one by Georg Simmel, one by Edward Sapir, that are both concerned with the rapidly changing communicative environment of contemporary life, and the effects that these changes are having on the structure of society and on the subjective experiences of individuals.

Sapir’s essay “Communication” (a 1931 entry in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*) sets out a view of society that treats society as if it were composed of multiple

orders of communication, ranging from the most explicit and obvious kind (communication practices involving language) to more implicit and subtle kinds.¹ Sapir is more directly concerned with forms of communicative practice than Simmel, and so his essay may seem more directly relevant to our central concern in this course. But one of his central points is that the most subtle and implicit forms of communication—the most difficult to “observe” and document in the ordinary sense—are probably also the most important. More on this in a moment.

Simmel’s famous essay on “The metropolis and mental life” (1903) is an extended meditation on specifically modern and specifically urban forms of subjectivity.² But the “metropolis” is treated here as a kind of ecology of communicative forms and practices, and on every page the “modern” sensibility emerges in and from the forms of encounter that define city life—multiple, fleeting, fragmentary, and transactional. Simmel also offers some profound reflections on the value of ethnographic observation.

In both essays we are led to see modern, urban individuals as being enveloped in complex webs of communicative practice, even as they sometimes work in subtle ways against becoming completely enmeshed in the semiotic plenitude of modern life. Simmel’s metropolitan subjects “resist being leveled down and worn out by a social-technological mechanism” (p. 409) and adopt a “blasé attitude” as a stylized refusal to submit to the constant “restimulation” that metropolitan life thrusts upon them; Sapir sees people facing “the obvious increase of overt communication” and attempting to shore up their sense of autonomy (and privacy) by creating “new obstacles to communication” (p. 108).

Both Georg Simmel (1858-1918) and Edward Sapir (1884-1939) were quintessential “moderns” and metropolitans. Simmel was born in Berlin and educated at the University of Berlin. Though esteemed for his skills as a lecturer, he never found secure employment in a permanent position at a university, and combined private tutoring with teaching (he was helped by a substantial inheritance).³ One of the founders of modern sociology, Simmel addressed—which is to say, wrote lengthy monographs on—topics that are still somewhat marginal within that discipline: money, secrecy, love. Sapir was born in a small town in Pomerania (now part of Germany) and emigrated with his family to the US at the age of six to settle in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and later in Brooklyn. He attended New York public schools and Columbia University, where he came under the influence of Franz Boas. He was clearly the most gifted linguist-anthropologist of his generation, eventually producing major grammatical studies of several North American Indian languages (Takelma, Southern Paiute, Navaho, Nootka, among others). But again, despite the high esteem of his peers, the first phases of Sapir’s professional life were neither steady nor stable. He spent a fifteen-year

¹ The phrase “an *as-if* communicative view of society” originates in (my no doubt imperfect memory of) a lecture on this text given by Michael Silverstein in 1983-84 at the University of Chicago.

² This essay of Simmel’s had a formative influence on members of the so-called “Chicago School” of sociology (see Bulmer, Martin. 1986. *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press): a 1936 translation into English by Edward Shils circulated as a *samizdat* (the translation used here is by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills). Louis Wirth’s 1938 essay “Urbanism as a way of life” (*American Journal of Sociology* 44(1): 1-24) is essentially a re-writing of Simmel’s 1903 essay.

³ For a discussion of Simmel’s style of lecturing, which one witness described as “philosophizing with his whole body,” see Stewart, Janet. 1999. Simmel at the lectern: the lecture as embodiment of text. *Body & Society* 5(4): 1-16.

period directing ethnological research for the Canadian government's Department of Mines, in Ottawa—a difficult posting for a Brooklynite cosmopolitan. Things improved in 1926 with a professorship in anthropology at the then fairly new University of Chicago.⁴

Sapir, “Communication” (1931)

“Communication” was the first of the eight entries that Edward Sapir contributed to the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* between 1931 and 1934.⁵ None of Sapir's contributions to the *Encyclopaedia* resemble conventional encyclopedia entries—even-handed reviews of the literature and agreed-upon key findings of this or that field of (in this case, social) scientific inquiry. Most of them are like the item on “Communication”: synthetic, allusive, wholly original (even idiosyncratic), with few or no references to published literature.

The essay opens in a tone almost of understatement: “It is obvious that for the building up of society, its units and subdivisions, and the understandings which prevail between its members some processes of communication are needed” (p. 104). This serves to establish ‘society’ as the central category of analysis; it also foregrounds “understandings” as contingent and provisional, grounded in and dependent on continued communicative activity:

While we often speak of society as though it were a static structure defined by tradition, it is, in the more intimate sense, nothing of the kind, but a highly intricate network of partial or complete understandings between the members of organizational units of every degree of size and complexity, ranging from a pair of lovers or a family to a league of nations or that ever increasing portion of humanity which can be reached by the press through all its transnational ramifications (104).

An early use of ‘transnational’, perhaps. In a widely cited 1984 review of “Theory in anthropology since the sixties,” Sherry Ortner noted a new trend coalescing within anthropological theory at the time she was writing: “For the past several years,” she writes, “there has been growing interest in analysis focused through one or another of a bundle of interrelated terms: practice, praxis, action, interaction, activity, experience, performance. A second, and closely related, bundle of terms focuses on the doer of all that doing: agent, actor, person, self, individual, subject” (Ortner 1984: 144). Sapir had clearly arrived there fifty years earlier. For him, society

is only apparently a static sum of social institutions; actually it is

⁴ For a full-length biography see Darnell, Regna. 2010. *Edward Sapir: Linguist, Anthropologist, Humanist*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

⁵ The others were “Custom” (vol. 4, pp. 658-662), “Dialect” (vol. 5, pp. 123-126), and “Fashion” (vol. 6, pp. 139-144), all of 1931; “Group” (vol. 7, pp. 178-182) of 1932; “Language” (vol. 9, pp. 155-169) of 1933; “Personality” (vol. 12, pp. 85-87) and “Symbolism” (vol. 14, pp. 492-495) of 1934. Given Sapir's premature death in February 1939, these short essays comprise an important part of what can be known about his “mature” thinking on issues of general theoretical import. See also the lecture notes for several years (at Chicago and Yale, up to 1937) of his course “The Psychology of Culture” (Sapir, Edward. 2002. *The Psychology of Culture*. Edited and reconstructed by Judith T. Irvine. Second edition, with a new introduction by the Editor. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter).

being reanimated or creatively reaffirmed from day to day by particular acts of a communicative nature which obtain among individuals participating in it (104).

This has relevance for us as ethnographers insofar as “particular acts of a communicative nature” are at least potentially susceptible of being observed and documented, “from day to day.”

Sapir’s essay, then, treats society *as if* it were an organization of communicative resources taken up by participants (at many levels or scales⁶ of social organization) in activities that are either obviously and overtly communicative, or that can be reconstructed or interpreted as if they were (perhaps “retroactively”). The essay’s central claim is not modest: “Every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either an explicit or an implicit sense” (104).

Sapir’s discussion is organized into three large sections. First comes a discussion of the “primary processes” of communication, arranging these (language, gesture, “imitation of overt behavior,” and “social suggestion”) on a scale or gradient of explicitness or overtness of communicative form/function, with communication involving speech—ubiquitous in any given society, and universally present in all of them—as the most explicit or overt of them all. Second comes a discussion of “secondary techniques” of communication—really, technologies: the railroad, the telegraph, the telephone, etc.—arranging these on a gradient of relative distance or remoteness from the always central communicative institution of any society, verbal interaction. The third and concluding section of the essay considers the “progressive increase in the radius and rapidity of communication” that Sapir sees as characteristic of the modern world.

Of the *primary processes* language is always and everywhere “the most explicit type of communicative behavior that we know of” (105). Language “consists in every case known to us of an absolutely complete referential apparatus of phonetic symbols which have the property of locating every known social referent, including all the recognized data of perception which the society that it serves carries in its tradition” (105).

Gesture is defined expansively by Sapir to include “intonations of the voice” and all manner of what we today call suprasegmental features (pitch, prosody, tempo, etc.), as well as “kinesic” and gestural manifestations as ordinarily understood. Here the point is that “the relatively unconscious symbolisms of gesture” (so defined) are “psychologically more significant in a given context than the words actually used” (105). Sapir points to instances when “the consistent message delivered by language symbolism in the narrow sense ... may flatly contradict the message communicated by the synchronous system of gestures” (105). Here follows the first of three aphoristic formulations:

In such cases as these we have a conflict between explicit and implicit communications in the growth of the individual’s social experience (105).

⁶ See Blommaert, J., J. Collins, and S. Slembrouck. 2005. Spaces of multilingualism. *Language & Communication* 25: 197-216; see also Carr E. & Lempert M. (eds.). 2016. *Scale: Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life*. California: University of California Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.15>

The distinction that Sapir draws here between language and ‘gesture’ recalls Goffman’s well-known distinction between “signs given” and “signs given off”: the latter are often more powerful in shaping the interaction as it unfolds in context, even as they are much harder to observe and transcribe than the former.

Next, Sapir takes up what he calls “the imitation of overt behavior,” which he sees as “the primary condition for the consolidation of society” (105). Such imitation, he writes, “while not communicative in intent, has always the retroactive value of a communication, for in the process of falling in with the ways of society one in effect acquiesces in the meanings that inhere in these ways” (105-106). He offers the example of church-going in some communities:

When one learns to go to church, for instance, because other members of the community set the pace for this kind of activity, it is as though a communication had been received and acted upon (106).

Here, then, is a way to understand *normativity* not as an abstract or idealized set of principles, but as an emergent quality variously immanent in behaviors, once we adopt the as-if-communicative view of society—treating society as if it were a matrix of “messages” (some explicit, some implicit) that are being sent and received and sometimes acted upon. People who behave “normally,” then, are *in effect* “acquiescing”—giving uptake to—implicit messages. There’s a contemporary US slang expression, heard in corporate/professional settings when people are discussing the non-normative behavior of an absent co-worker: “[He/she] *didn’t get the memo.*” The discussion concludes with a second aphorism:

It is the function of language to articulate and rationalize the full content of these informal communications in the growth of the individual’s social experience (106).

Continuing down the scale from maximally explicit communicative forms to less and less explicit ones, Sapir next takes up what he calls (in his own quotation marks) “social suggestion,” which he defines as “the sum total of new acts and new meanings that are implicitly made possible by these types of social behavior” (106):

Thus, the particular method of revolting against the habit of church going in a given society, while contradictory, on the surface, of the conventional meanings of that society, may nevertheless receive all its social significance from hundreds of existing prior communications that belong to the culture of the group as a whole (106).

There’s nothing new about the point that even non-normative (e.g., “rebellious”) behavior only becomes interpretable against the background of the norms it violates (and, in violating, illuminates)—indeed, it’s been a mainstay of social (and sociological) thinking at least since Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1897); the problem of ‘deviance’ was likewise front and center in sociology for much of the 20th century.⁷ What is new is the way that Sapir situates normativity and ‘deviance’ alike in the “as-if-communicative” matrix of society and culture.⁸

⁷ To choose only one item from a vast bibliography: Erikson, Kai T. 1966. *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance*. London: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

⁸ Sapir made a similar point in his “Psychology of Culture” lectures when he observed that “Antisocial or unsocial persons may produce cultural forms or social assets, as for instance when an artist’s work, produced in

To conclude his discussion of “social suggestion” Sapir returns to and reinforces the two interrelated points he articulated at the start of the essay: (a.) the claim that communicative practices and behaviors are the more powerful in shaping the “understandings” that undergird social life the more that they are implicit; and (b.) the claim that communicative acts vary in their form and their effectiveness depending on the social scale at which people participate in them.

To the first point: “The importance of the unformulated and unverballed communications of society is so great that one who is not intuitively familiar with them is likely to be baffled by the significance of certain forms of behavior, even if he is thoroughly aware of their external forms and of the verbal symbols that accompany them” (106).

The implications for ethnography (and ethnographers) are fairly clear here: the communicative practices that are the most overt and explicit—and hence the easiest to observe and document—exert the least power in the formation of the social consciousness of participants in society. Sapir offers no practical hints as to how the baffled observer might gain access to these “unformulated and unverballed communications of society.” Instead, he offers a third aphorism:

It is largely the function of the artist to make articulate these more subtle intentions of society (106).

To the second point Sapir observes again that “communicative processes ... are indefinitely varied as to form and meaning for the various types of personal relationship into which society resolves itself” (106). The same communicative form—“a fixed type of conduct or a linguistic symbol”—may have very different “communicative significance” at different scales of social participation, from “within the confines of a family” to “the members of an economic group” to “the nation at large”:

Generally speaking, the smaller the circle and the more complex the the understandings already arrived at within it, the more economical can the act of communication afford to become. A single word passed between members of an intimate group, in spite of its apparent vagueness and ambiguity, may constitute a far more precise communication than volumes of carefully prepared correspondence interchanged between two governments (106).

It would fall to later analysts of communication—informed by concepts from semiotics and the philosophy of language—to articulate the importance of *indexicality* in the interpretation of utterance meaning, and to show how utterances in context are always located in the tension between indexical presupposition (taken-for-granted meanings “already arrived at”) and indexical entailment (new, surprising, or unexpected meanings).⁹ The density of shared

isolation, integrates social ideas that have been lying around. ... Similarly, a hermit is antisocial in one way, yet ... even in his rationalization of self-isolation, he is a part of a larger community. He may be an unwilling or unwitting part, but he is in a sense a member of society and a participant in culture. You can escape the ‘social’ in the sense of social gatherings, but you cannot escape culture” (Irvine (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 52).

⁹ See Silverstein, M. 1976. Shifters, linguistic categories and cultural description. In K. Basso and H. Selby (eds.), *Meaning in anthropology*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, pp. 11-55; Silverstein, M. 1992. The indeterminacy of contextualization: When is enough enough? In P. Auer and A. di Luzio (eds.), *The*

presupposition among “the members of an intimate group” is what enables the utterance of a single word to achieve such communicative preciseness of indexical reference.

From here Sapir passes to what he calls “secondary techniques ... for the facilitation of the primary communicative processes of society” (106), arranging these on a scale not of explicit-to-implicit, but in terms of their ability to preserve the denotational content of a spoken message (language). First he takes up what he calls “language transfers,” technologies that reproduce utterance content in a medium more durable than speech: writing and Morse Code are offered as examples. Messages in these media can be back-translated word-by-word into ordinary (spoken) language, and the uptake of these is always also in a form that can be so translated. Sapir does not use the term, but these media are viewed in the essay as prosthetic with respect to speech.

Next taken up are forms of “communicative symbolism”—examples include traffic signals, signaling by semaphore or equivalent (Sapir calls this “wigwagging”), and the use of smoke signals. Such techniques “are of value partly in helping out a situation where neither language nor some form of language transfer can be applied, partly where it is desired to encourage the automatic nature of the desired response” (107). The semiotic plenitude of “language” (speech) becomes “a little annoying or even dangerous to rely upon” when the situation calls for “a simple this or that, or yes or no” in response. Sapir doesn’t label them as such, but these are speech surrogates.

The third group of technologies is internally heterogeneous; the principle of inclusion here seems to be that they “extend the physical conditions allowing for communication”: the railroad, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, and the airplane are all included here. “It is to be noted that such instruments as the railroad and the radio are not communicative in character as such,” Sapir writes; “they become so only because they facilitate the presentation of types of stimuli which act as symbols of communication or which contain implications of communicative significance” (107). Sapir concludes this section by noting the tendency of “some writers” to “exaggerate the importance of the spread in modern times of such inventions as the railroad and the telephone” (107).

Sapir next considers the implications of “the progressive increase” in the radius and rapidity of communication characteristic of his own “present” (in 1931). Here he offers a view of life in a “primitive society,” where “communication is reserved for the members of the tribe and, at best, a small number of surrounding tribes” who “act as a kind of buffer between the significant psychological world—the world of one’s own tribal culture—and the great unknown or unreal that lies beyond” (107).

Today, ... the appearance of a new fashion in Paris is linked by a series of rapid and necessary events with the appearance of the same

Contextualization of Language. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 55-75; Silverstein, M. 1993. Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function. In J. Lucy (ed.), *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*. Cambridge: CUP, pp. 33-58; Silverstein, M. 2003. Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication* 23: 193-229. See also Lee, B. 1997. *Talking Heads: Language, Metalanguage, and the Semiotics of Subjectivity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Agha, A. 2007. *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge: CUP. For an extended application of these concepts to a single ethnographic case, see Hanks, W. 1990. *Referential Practice: Language and Lived Space among the Maya*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

fashion in such distant places as Berlin, London, New York, San Francisco, and Yokohama (107-108).

“The multiplication of far-reaching techniques of communication,” Sapir writes, “has two important results.” First, the increase in “the sheer radius of communication” means that “for certain purposes the whole civilized world is made the psychological equivalent of a primitive tribe” (108). The expanded reach of communication technologies also leads to what we today might call de- and re-territorialization:

[It] lessens the importance of mere geographical contiguity. Owing to the technical nature of these sophisticated communicative devices, parts of the world that are geographically remote may, in terms of behavior, be actually much closer to each other than adjoining regions. ... This means, of course, a tendency to remap the world both sociologically and psychologically. Even now it is possible to say that the scattered “scientific world” is a social unity which has no clearcut geographical location (108).

In a passage that chimes with the Brexit vote and the 2016 US election, Sapir observes that

the world of urban understanding in America contrasts rather sharply with the rural world. The weakening of the geographical factor in social organization must in the long run profoundly modify our attitude toward the meaning of personal relations and of social classes and even of nationalities (108).

In the penultimate paragraph of the essay Sapir brings to the surface a set of distinctively modern anxieties of communication: “The increasing ease of communication is purchased at a price, for it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep an intended communication within the desired bounds” (108).

As “a humble example of this new problem” Sapir cites “the inadvisability of making certain kinds of statement on the telephone” (ibid.). Here, Sapir is referencing a fixture of early 20th century telephony, the “party line,” a single telephonic circuit shared by multiple users. *Wikipedia*¹⁰ notes that “Party lines provided no privacy in communication. They were frequently used as a source of entertainment and gossip, as well as a means of quickly alerting entire neighborhoods of emergencies.”

Party lines are long gone, but in a world where many of our communications are the private property of transnational corporations, it’s clear that this problem has only grown larger since the time Sapir was writing. Separating direct addressees from overhearers and bystanders has never been more difficult. There is now a large literature on the way that communication on social media platforms can result in what’s called “context collapse”—this is “the phenomenon widely debated in social media research, where various audiences convene around single communicative acts in new networked publics, causing confusion and anxiety among social media users.”¹¹ A striking and widely publicized example occurred in

¹⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party_line_\(telephony\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party_line_(telephony))

¹¹ Blommaert, J., and G. Szabla. 2017. Does context really collapse in social media interaction? Available online at <https://alternative-democracy-research.org/2017/06/27/does-context-really-collapse-in-social-media->

late 2013 when a US-based PR professional tweeted an AIDS joke to her 170 followers just before boarding a long-haul flight from London to Cape Town for her Christmas holiday. Arriving in Cape Town after a long nap, she discovered that her joke had been retweeted tens of thousands of times, and that she had been fired from her job.¹² Sapir:

All effects which demand a certain intimacy of understanding tend to become difficult and are therefore avoided. It is a question whether the obvious increase of overt communication is not constantly being corrected, as it were, by the creation of new obstacles to communication. The fear of being too easily understood may, in many cases, be more aptly defined as the fear of being understood by too many—so many, indeed, as to endanger the psychological reality of the image of the enlarged self confronting the not-self (p. 108).

Simmel, “The metropolis and mental life” (1903)

Simmel proposes to address “the deepest problems of modern life”—namely, how the individual can “preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of general culture, and of the technique of life” (409). How is it, he asks, that “the person resists being leveled down and worn out by a social-technological mechanism” (ibid.)?

The metropolis is defined as “the aggregation of so many people with such differentiated interests, who must integrate their relations and activities into a highly complex organization” (412-413).¹³ These conditions of life produce a “metropolitan type of individual” whose sensibility is rooted in the

intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli. Man is a differentiating creature. His mind is stimulated by the difference between a momentary impression and the one which preceded it (410; emphasis in orig.).

The subjective experience of metropolitan life is one of “the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions” (410). Perhaps Ezra Pound captured some of this in his famous Imagist poem of 1912, “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.¹⁴

[interaction/](#). See also boyd, danah, and Alice Marwick. 2011. “I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately”: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 21 Feb 2011; Davis, Jenny L., and Nathan Jurgenson. 2014. Context collapse: theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society* 17(4): 476-485.

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html>

¹³ Compare much more recent formulations of the sociolinguistic condition of ‘super-diversity’ in European cities, e.g., Blommaert, J., & Rampton, B. 2011. Language and Superdiversity. *Diversities* 13(2): 1-21.

Available at: http://newdiversities.mmg.mpg.de/?page_id=2056

Coordinating the activities of “so many people with such differentiated interests” requires communication technologies—clocks, watches, train schedules—through which the importance of “punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence” (413).

All these factors work together to produce “a highly personal subjectivity ... the blasé attitude. The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves” (413-414). In the blasé attitude, writes Simmel,

the nerves find in their refusal to react to their stimulation the last possibility of accommodating to the contents and forms of metropolitan life. The self-preservation of certain personalities is bought at the price of devaluating the whole objective world, a devaluation which in the end unavoidably drags one’s own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness (415).

Central to this “devaluation” of “the whole objective world” for Simmel was the pervasive presence in metropolitan existence of a universalizing scheme of valuation: money. Money for Simmel was the name for a certain principle of semiotic mediation in terms of which the “blasé attitude” seems not only adaptive, but inevitable:

Money economy and the dominance of the intellect are intrinsically connected. They share a matter-of-fact attitude in dealing with men and with things; and, in this attitude, a formal justice is often coupled with an inconsiderate hardness (411).

“By being the equivalent of all the manifold things in one and the same way,” Simmel writes,

money becomes the most frightful leveller. For money expresses all qualitative differences of things in terms of ‘how much?’ Money, with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability. All things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money (414).

In these conditions the individual must cope with “the difficulty of asserting his own personality within the dimensions of metropolitan life” (420):

One seizes upon qualitative differentiation in order somehow to attract the attention of the social circle by playing upon its sensitivity for differences (421).

The constant temptation is to adopt “the most tendentious peculiarities”—“mannerism, caprice, and preciousness” (421): dandyism, in other words. Here, Oscar Wilde walks hand-in-hand with Instagram celebrities in the propitiation of the “personal brand.” For indeed

¹⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/12675/in-a-station-of-the-metro>

the meaning of these extravagances does not at all lie in the contents of such behavior, but rather in its form of “being different,” of standing out in a striking manner and thereby attracting attention (421).

But like the smiling faces of our Facebook ‘friends’, the shiny surface often masks an interior anxiety:

For many character types, ultimately the only means of saving for themselves some modicum of self-esteem and the sense of filling a position is indirect, through the awareness of others (421).

The metropolis emerges finally in Simmel’s essay as a scene of irreducible complexity and semiotic plenitude, and a constant threat to “the psychological reality of the image of the enlarged self confronting the not-self,” to borrow Sapir’s phrase:

Here in the buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technology, in the formation of community life, and in the visible institutions of the state, is offered such an overwhelming fullness of crystallized and impersonalized spirit that the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact. ... This results in the individual’s summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization in order to preserve his most personal core. He has to exaggerate this personal element in order to remain audible even to himself (422).

But not merely a deafening, un-anchored complexity. For Simmel the metropolis was the meeting place and battleground between two contrasting and perhaps incommensurable views of society: one he identifies as “18th century liberalism,” and one he terms “19th century romanticism.”

The first, 18th century liberalism, is based on “the cry for liberty and equality ..., the belief in the individual’s full freedom of movement in all social and intellectual relationships” (423). The episteme of 18th century liberalism for Simmel was founded in the recognition of “the ‘general human being’ in every individual” (423).

The second, 19th century romanticism (Simmel cites Goethe), is based on the idea of “individuals liberated from historical bonds [who] now wished to distinguish themselves from one another” (423). This view is founded in the recognition of “man’s qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability.”

“The external and internal history of our time,” Simmel writes, “takes its course within the struggle and in the changing entanglements of these two ways of defining the individual’s role in the whole of society” (423).

It is the function of the metropolis to provide the arena for this struggle and its reconciliation. For the metropolis presents the peculiar conditions which are revealed to us as the opportunities and the stimuli for the development of both these ways of allocating roles to men (423).

Conclusion

What's an ethnographer to do in the face of the complexity of modern life, and in the face of such fundamental dilemmas? Anthropology—the traditional disciplinary home of ethnography viewed as a 'method'—is inconveniently on both sides of the conflict that Simmel identifies, unstably balanced between recognition of “the ‘general human being’ in every individual” and the “qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability” of every ethnographic context.

Perhaps surprisingly—and as testimony to its own semiotic plenitude—Simmel's essay itself offers some useful suggestions for aspiring ethnographers like ourselves:

In certain seemingly insignificant traits, which lie upon the surface of life, the same psychic currents characteristically unite. ... [F]rom each point on the surface of existence—however closely attached to the surface alone—one may drop a sounding into the depth of the psyche so that all the most banal externalities of life finally are connected with the ultimate decisions concerning the meaning and style of life (413).

In a later essay Simmel develops these points further; the passage below¹⁵ served as the epigraph for Erving Goffman's 1953 PhD dissertation.¹⁶ This passage takes us back to where we started: Sapir's assertion that “while we often speak of society as though it were a static structure defined by tradition, it is, in the more intimate sense, nothing of the kind, but a highly intricate network of partial or complete understandings...”:

... there exists an immeasurable number of less conspicuous forms of relationship and kinds of interaction. Taken singly, they may seem negligible. But since in actuality they are inserted into the comprehensive and, as it were, official social formations, they alone produce society as we know it. [...] On the basis of the major social formations—the traditional subject matter of social science—it would be similarly impossible to piece together the real life of society as we encounter it in our experience. [...] Sociation continuously emerges and ceases and emerges again. Even where its external flux and pulsation are not sufficiently strong to form organizations proper, they link individuals together. That people look at one another and are jealous of one another; that they exchange letters or dine together; that irrespective of all tangible interests they strike one another as pleasant or unpleasant; that gratitude for altruistic acts makes for inseparable union; that one asks another man after a certain street, and that people dress and adorn themselves for one another—the whole gamut of relations that play from one person to another and that may be momentary or permanent, conscious or unconscious,

¹⁵ “The Field of Sociology” [1917]; in K. Wolff (ed.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶ Goffman, E. 1953. *Communication Conduct in an Island Community*. PhD thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago. I've lightly edited the passage (omitted text marked by ellipses [...]).

ephemeral or of grave consequence (and from which these illustrations are quite casually chosen), all these incessantly tie men together. Here are the interactions among the atoms of society. They account for all the toughness and elasticity, all the color and consistency of social life, that is so striking and yet so mysterious.

These two essays by Sapir and Simmel offer no recipe, no template, and little or no helpful “scaffolding.” If we want our studies not just to describe contemporary life from some supposedly neutral standpoint, but to partake of some of the qualities of the experiences that we are describing—as these two essays do—we may have to think of new ways to represent what we find in our own field materials. In the meantime, Simmel and Sapir remind us of some obvious but important first principles:

1. “Theory” (or “analysis”) and “observation” are not two different and independent activities. The decision what to observe (and document) is always theoretical, whether consciously or unconsciously; and yet,
2. the documentation of “seemingly insignificant traits which lie on the surface of life” is absolutely indispensable, because without documentation of these you cannot hope to
3. “drop a sounding” from them “into the depth of the psyche so that all the most banal externalities of life finally are connected with the ultimate decisions concerning the meaning and style of life.”